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ABSTRACT

When college freshmen are required to write, it seems that they operate under several values that appear to be perpetuated by schooling and should be addressed. It is important to realize that the contexts for writing of middle school students and college freshmen are virtually identical. The first comparable value is speed--the rapid expression of information signals the academic competence of the communicator. The second value is image, which includes neatness and verbal convention as important features of communication, and the third is silence, as the atmosphere in which teaching and learning are thought to be most successful. In addition, students are seen not as composers, but as recorders of the teacher's closure. In recognizing and understanding these values, it is necessary to allow time and flexibility for students and teachers to come to shared interpretations of assignments, thus ensuring success unrelated to speed and quick thinking. Also, students should write in a community that values writing, one in which the teacher is convinced of its value, peers are trained in its value, and student writers discover their own closure. Finally, collaborations preclude silences. (CRH)

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Origins of the Freshman Writer: A View from the Middle School

Martin (1976) and Hogan (1980) showed students "losing interest" in writing during middle school years and suggested effects of schooling. Recent studies have urged practitioners to treat learning and writing as time consuming activities, stress collaboration and discussion, and help students focus on mastering ideas or intended communications. (See especially Graves, 1983; Goodlad, 1983; Boomer, 1983, Buddemeier, 1982.) Findings presented here propose that student writing continues firmly rooted in school culture and that interventions in writing processes must confront perspectives on learning.

The findings to be presented emerged as a college, basic writing instructor entered a middle school setting as teacher and resource person. He participated in and observed the teaching of writing in various disciplines for one year. Data were elicited from classroom observations, his own pedagogical interactions with students, written artifacts, and discussions and interviews with students, teachers, and school administrators.

INTRODUCTION: TWO VALUES

She sits in the second row of your Basic Writing class--but where does she come from? I don't mean: she comes from the Northwood-Blueville School District. I mean: when you say, "We

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are going to be writing," where does she come from?

You mean the multistage, multilayered processes of revision, the rhetorical concerns, inventions, imaginations, transforms, tagmemes, and final products. But what lights up on her switchboard when you call in with: "In this class you will be writing"?

Several values appear to be perpetuated by schooling and which might be quite important to address in any freshman writing class. Looking back to a middle school, at some contexts, environments if you prefer, of students writing and learning to write there, two special values of the middle school community appear integral to the perspectives of students as they consider writing in the middle school. I believe I could make a case, which I won't do here, that these values are integral to the perspectives of college freshman as well:

> Value #1 is Speed: Rapid expression of information signals the academic competence of the communicator.
>
> A second value is Image, which includes--a.) that the most important features of communication for school are neatness and verbal convention, and b.) that teaching and learning are most successful in an environment where students are silent.

These values, reflected in behaviors, language, and events throughout the middle school, are generally revered by teachers and students. They explain students' considerations of what writing is and how it is done.

SCENARIO

One Tuesday afternoon in the Fall of 1982, I was talking with George and John when a young woman stepped into the commons area where we stood. We looked up from our conversation--John who chairs the department, a bit bewildered, obviously remembering the likeness but not the details. I was also a newcomer to the scene at that time--I'd recently come to this school, and my job was broadly described as a resource person--one who should assess the school's writing program while contributing some wisdom to as many teachers as possible about how to integrate writing into their curricula. And, I was mildly aware that the person who had arrived was and was not a familiar presence in this middle school.

But George--interrupting himself, eagerly greeted her--A former student--Lisa. Already he was fully engaged in what-r-you-up-to's and seemed pleased that anyone would return to him, probably 5 or 6 years after he'd been their teacher: "Where-r-you-now?"

And then an incongruity sounded!

"I'm at East State U. and I love it. It's so different."

George: "How-r-your classes? Difficult?"

Lisa: "Well, pretty--It's such a different scene from the high school. I don't really know yet."

John: "So, how's English? I'm sure Mr. Krebs would

like to know <u>that</u>."

Lisa went on to say she had been placed in English 011:

"It's for credit; you have to pass that before you can go on to the English Series--101 and 102."

And George said, "Well, sounds like you're very busy."

And John said, "Do you remember all the grammar Mr. Krebs taught you?"

I don't think George and John recognized it, but I knew English 011, though by a different number at another university, because only only five months before I had been teaching it. And there I was plop in the middle of Lisa's <u>Looking Backwards</u>.

It was the same! Nothing had happened to Lisa between Mr. Krebs' 8th English and English 011. It was the same! I'd seen the papers of the middle school students and those of the Basic English students. It was the same! Barely a difference in the look and sound of many papers in the two groups.

I hesitated, realizing that a lot must happen to Lisa and others in those pre-college years. Frightening--would I return to the college classroom in a few years to meet the Lisa's that George, John, and I were presently teaching?

In the ensuing seventeen months of school time, I began to look at the middle school scene and to ask: Why is a sentence which is not a sentence in middle school still not a sentence in a Basic English class in college? That is, what is going on in middle

school "literacy events" that seems to keep going on in college "literacy events"?

This report is not a comparative study of the texts of middle schoolers and freshman. The textual similarities--and as I have seen them they are noticeable, though I won't contend about that here--are only markers of students' sense that everything is the same. That is, that the contexts for their writing may be, at least to the students, virtually identical from middle school to college. This paper also does not discuss development and change from middle school to college.

> Let the record show: This is not another denunciation of public education. I want to present freshman origins for the purpose of improving teaching at that level.

Provided here are background descriptions, descriptions of the writing environment of middle schoolers as represented in a case study of writing in one middle school (7 to 9). What implications do these descriptions of a middle school's values have for teaching college freshmen to write? First, they say something to us about the freshman audiences we address and the messages they hear when we say: "You are going to be writing." Second, they may cause us to ask what values are associated with our own teaching and the learning in our courses. Third, these descriptions highlight a confrontation, already partly addressed

by the writing across the curriculum movement, between new perspectives on teaching writing and traditional practices in learning.

Again, my premise is that students have certain habituated behaviors and attitudes. These are, if you will, adaptations to a schooling scene that includes writing. What is valued in that scene?

VALUE#1 SPEED

The rapid expression of information signals academic competence. Visualize three "environments" in which this value is displayed: (1) the daily business environment in the school, (2) the "ditto" environment of teaching, and (3) the test environment.

(1) Since my first weeks at the middle school, I have heard bells. 39 ring between 8am and 3pm. Only 6 thirty minute periods are uninterrupted by bells. I find myself trying to begin and end daily tasks, even personal reading and writing, between bells. Where there is in-class writing it is often guided by the bells, bells, bells.

There are other contributors to this time conscious environment. The superintendent is reportedly very attached to the time-on-task movement. The principal and office secretaries use the public address system to direct students throughout the building, often directing them to go "immediately." And, in general, teachers use words like "quickly" and "let's go" in talking to students about task performance from passing out

papers and walking down a hall to completing classwork. In school everyone seems to think the student is moving too slowly.

(2) Beyond the constraints of daily business are assignment deadlines to which middle schoolers adapt-- the ditto environment, if you will. One social studies teacher operates his class using "packets." Students are expected to answer questions in their packets. The packets include map work and related short articles on U.S. history but are, essentially, questions to be answered briefly and regularly following lectures and textbook readings. The packet dittoes pace the student. Similarly, a ditto worksheet is often the focus of a single class session. To finish the work of the class is to finish the ditto.

Do you see? The pace of student thinking is set by the ditto. The faster it's completed the faster the student has thought. Incompleteness signals less competent thinking. The student's routine is to "write through" the ditto quickly--briefly, if it is to be "done" in the 40 minute class period, and move on.

The brevity of thought taught by the ditto seems to be the lifeblood of much pedagogy. The student's routine is a recapitulation of the teacher's routine of completing the curriculum. If you have discussed the use of writing across the curriculum, you have probably encountered this concern: "I have a curriculum to <u>get through</u>"--That's how it sounds in the middle school. Or, as one colleague describes his movement through the world cultures curriculum: "After I <u>do</u> Russia, I have to <u>do</u>

Japan." Knowledge becomes a quantity contained in a curriculum, dosed out regularly until the container is emptied--and, presumably, the student is full. The time in which a teacher must do this is limited.

(3) A prominent element in this model of information processing is the test. The test is similar to the ditto; it is environment. It is regular, timed, limited, and the student writing there is perfunctory transaction--giving back quickly the information that was recently handed out.

The "speed" value may be seen particularly in the test environment as <u>speed of expression</u>. In the test environment students condense information to cue language. That is, often single words or phrase responses are acceptable--whatever cues the teacher. A response longer than a sentence is not required or necessary to cue the teacher.

Students come to value speed of expression:

> Joe had finished some writing ahead of others in his class; he was engaged about 5 minutes. When I asked if he might consider his thoughts and his writing a little more, he returned:
>
> "Why? It's all there. I ain't no dummy; it don't take me a long time. Some of them [referring to classmates

will be there all day."] He feels academically more competent when he can write or complete his assignment more quickly. And in part, such valuing is a reflection of the kind of writing the student does frequently and most often in school--writing in a test environment. In part, such valuing may also reflect

teachers' views of what writing is. Witness the science teacher's response to her participation in a faculty writing workshop:

> "I had just assumed that when good writers write, it comes right out on paper. It's interesting to know that people stop and scratch and hesitate, whether they are a good writer or not a good writer."

But longer discourse is nearly always excluded from the test environment. Teachers tell me that they sometimes require explanations of a single paragraph in length. And in social studies and English classes I've found regular, out of class reports, or discourse longer than a page. Besides the time required, the rationale for this exclusion is typically articulated: "I don't give these kids essay tests because they can't do them." Given such an environment students cannot write or express themselves at length because they do not. Especially where grade reports are sent home every six weeks and where teachers' time on discussion of grades exceeds time on discussion of pedagogy, a test environment is a constant context for learning to write.

In addition to speed of expression, the test environment fosters what my colleague John Brunner, in his research on study skills and schooling, is calling "certainty." "Certainty" in school culture means to the student, as it does to the teacher, that predictability, organization, tidiness, and measurability are markers of the learning environment or characteristics of the learning process. There are no open-ended questions. The teacher owns the questions and answers, and in the middle school a teacher may say: "These students need this structure in order

to learn." The test environment and the question-answer pedagogy that accompanies it is a structure that students have learned, accepted, adapted to, expect: The student waits to obtain the questions and answers patterned by the teacher and to return them-- "I memorize; the teacher signals me; I return the information."

Thus, in frequent testings, the student is required to reflect information, to reflect the teacher's closure. Pedagogically, there is a lot of copying; any notetaking is copying. There are, as one colleague assured me, "No 'out in the air' notes"--nothing left to chance in student thinking. Students consider themselves recorders and not composers--so do their teachers.

The test environment fosters a way of reaching closure on ideas. Student writing on a test, which is an expression of ideas, is, to both teacher and student either accurate or inaccurate. Ideas can be memorized and are either cued up or not cued up. Closure precedes that cueing up, so that generation time for the student is negligible. That is, the student displays her competence when ideas can be immediately produced, in the sense that you would produce a prepared resume or passport from a folder or pocket. To generate or invent or reconfigure or add or reorganize is untidy and the potential for being a reflection of incompetence is high. And nearly always, <u>it takes more time</u> for the student to reach closure of his own.

Thus, in addition to thinking of speed as a value (1) in the daily business of the school, (2) in the ditto environment of

teaching, and (3) in expression on tests, we can also view it as a value that, fostered by a test environment, infuses students' thinking about their own thinking competence or about their ability to reach conclusions of their own.

There is an anomaly here, however. Finding one's own closure on an idea is a possession prized by learning skills experts (of course). But teachers also identify drawing inferences and reaching conclusions as goals of their teaching. And students, partcularly adolescents, are vocal and protective about their right to personal thinking and meaning making. Consider the following seventh graders' incights on achieving personal closure in a writing task. They are not talking about speed as a context, but, instead, a teacher's response to their writings which seems to have had a similar effect:

> Stacy: She makes all these marks on your paper. You go to write a story of your friend being your dog and it ends up being your dog is your enemy.
>
> Susan: It's <u>my</u> story; not hers. It's like it's not your own anymore. You started out telling one thing and end up with another.

These students are aware that teacher commentary can push them to claim meanings that they don't intend. In the same disarming way, the <u>speed</u> value in the middle school, seems to affect student learning, thinking and writing.

<u>VALUE #2--Image</u>

The principal communicates a value to the faculty, and

consequently to students, that might be termed "concern for image":

(1) "See me about your responsibility and my expectations of you when I need building extra clean."

(2) "See me about wearing a tie everyday."

(3) The science teacher and the teacher who sponsors the school paper are called into the principal's office to talk about the science teacher's letter to the editor: "We can't have grammar like that going out.

These are all part of what the principal calls "our image."

Eighth grade students become familiar with "image" concerns, whether or not their awareness translates into practice. When surveyed with the question: "When I think about writing in school, I think I need most help with _____."--they fill in the blank with "neatness," "handwriting," "spelling," about 40% of the time. Teachers, asked a similar question, show these concerns in similar percentages. The students are concerned about what their teachers are and have been concerned about.

When 13 year old Mike says, "I can't write," he means: "You look at what I put on paper, but you can't read it because of misshapen letters and irregular spellings." He doesn't mean: "I can't think," but already in 7th grade, it comes down to that, so he's remedial, failing, angry.

In the classroom, especially, three image-related concerns emerge: (1) neatness, (2) verbal convention, and (3) silence.

(1) "I want all the chairs pushed in," said the English teacher. The stress on this value is yearlong. When the 7th graders are asked, "What comments have teachers written on your

papers?" they tell us: "Sloppy!" and "Write neatly!" The stress on this neatness value is school-long. These are enduring concerns: "Sit up straight." "Do you do that at home?" "Get your margins straight." These are image, and for the student all part of the same context.

(2) Verbal convention means a concern for the surface features of text. The detached teaching of grammar continues embedded in the fabric of the middle school. "You can do pronouns," says the veteran teacher, and the English Ed. student teacher, coming from the state university, unaware that it could be otherwise, prepares a pronoun quiz.

Although a program for writing across the curriculum has been in place five years, the math teacher is incredulous when I suggest that she need not mark every misspelled word: "You want me to be concerned about their writing, and then you tell me not to mark spelling. When I collect a writing sample, I expect it to be spelled right." Her colleague social studies teacher has a system: He deducts for spelling, punctuation, and usage errrors--a point apiece. One three page report of some substance is graded substantially lower than a vacuous one pager.

I don't mean to suggest an absence of differences: Simultaneously, Mr. M's English class is guided by Murray '68 and Graves '83. Mr. B's science class sometimes journals the day's findings, Mr. W experiments with asking students to verbalize math processes, and Chairman John's English class goes through various maneuvers she brought home from last summer's State

Writing Project.

(3) Valuing image also means valuing a teaching environment that might be called silence.

> "What'd that substitute say about those kids? I don't care if she taught anything; just were they quiet for her?"

In our school, students are grouped by (quote) "ability level." Students in a D-section vocalize the "we-never-get-to-talk" complaint more than others. With most sections, but moreso in the lower ones, class work is individualized whenever possible. Student talk in a group is reduced to 'yea' and 'nay,' or to cue language-- a strategy chosen as much for tidy class control as for any other reason. Student talk, in the view of teachers and students, often leads either to disruption of "the classroom" or to wasted time. Thus, student silences say that there is an orderliness to a class and that something is getting "done."

Such silences seem to carry from classroom practice into students personal expressions in writing. There, however, when teachers look at student writing, they seem also to expect, beyond the image--the neatness and verbal convention--something more than silences. And so do students.

What can an understanding of these values suggest to us about teaching freshman writers, addressing our student audiences? First, allowing time and flexibility for students to negotiate the meaning of teacher controlled assignments--that is, for teachers and students to come to shared interpretations of

assignments-- will produce produce opportunities for success unrelated to speed and quick thinking. Second, sharing student writing in a community that values it--that community being a teacher convinced of its value and peers trained in its value--will teach the student writer what his own closure is. Third, finding ways and courage to evaluate processes will suggest to students that image isn't everything. Finally, collaborations preclude silences.

What we value will be evident in our pedagogy, so it behooves us to identifying the central values of our pedagogy: Do we value the sentence as a feature of text that must, above other surface feature concerns, be conventional? Let's say that and show that and comment on that with singularity. If it's a greater value, minimize lesser values: commas, paragraphs, margins-- or teach them as supplementary. Do we value reflective thinking--unique responses to the thinking of others. Then we must give time to such a focus, perhaps to the exclusion of summarizing or writing static descriptions.

This is not a "skills approach" but a "radical approach"-- where the teacher takes time and calls the student to take time to do a few things well. We of course must have in mind what those few things are. We can hold conventions to decide that, but meanwhile, consciously or otherwise, we are saying to students, in the long run: "Here are a few values to consider about writing." We must get to the root of what we do, so we can be honest with students about what we do or affect.

Finally, if we believe this and similar reports, we will direct political and research energies into a crucial confrontation. If new perspectives on teaching writing are at odds with traditional practices in learning, then our discipline is in jeopardy or we are on the forefront of making a contribution to educational change in a large way. What directions should we take? Promote innovations in writing across the curriculum, interdisciplinary courses, writing courses stretched across semesters. Also, value schools of education, or contribute to making educators valuable, viewing school teachers as essential collaborators in research.

All this in the interest of a Lisas we will teach five years hence.

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